FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
JUNE 2, 2002

"FOR THE STORMS WHICH GIVE TOUGHNESS TO THE SPIRIT..."
John M. Buchanan

O loving God,
to turn away from you is to fall,
to turn toward you is to rise,
and to stand before you is to abide forever.
Grant us, dear God,
in all our duties your help;
in all our uncertainties your guidance;
in all our dangers your protection;
and in all our sorrows your peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

"FOR THE STORMS WHICH GIVE TOUGHNESS TO OUR SPIRITS . . ."
June 2, 2002

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Matthew 7:24-29
Psalm 46

O God, when it seems like life is falling apart, be our refuge and our strength. Silence in us any voice but your own now, so that we may hear the word you have for us this day: in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Some passages of scripture I relate to individuals I have known along the way. Psalm 46 is Art Romig's. The Reverend Arthur M. Romig was one of the unforgettable people I have been privileged to know and work with. He was my colleague, friend, and in ways I'm not sure he ever knew, my mentor and inspiration. I met him in Columbus, Ohio, where he settled after his official retirement, although he had never really stopped working. He was born in China, the son of Presbyterian missionaries. As a teenager, he was sent home to the College of Wooster, in Ohio, where the Presbyterian church used to have a high school for children of missionaries who needed some cultural assimilation before college. Art stayed at Wooster for high school and went on to college, learned to play American football, attended Princeton Seminary, met and married Helen, a New York social worker who was also an artist, and together they returned to China as missionaries in 1931. Their children were born in China. When I met Art he was in his late 60s, and one of the best moves I ever made was to invite him to join the staff of the Columbus church I was serving to help out in lots of ways but particularly in pastoral care.

I loved to talk to Art about his China experience, which began just before the Japanese invaded Manchuria and extended through the long years of the Japanese-Chinese War and included a time of imprisonment after Pearl Harbor and finally a prisoner exchange, which brought him back to the U.S.A. to rejoin his family. Art was so self-effacing, he was reluctant to talk about those days. "Sounds too much like bragging," he used to say. But I was persistent. I wanted to know how it was, what he did every day, what he ate, how he preached in Chinese, how he got along with his Japanese captors, how it was to be alone and separated from his wife and children. Gradually he began to talk, and over the period of several years that we worked together, he told me wonderful stories. I was able to persuade Art to write it down, if only for his grandchildren, which he began to do. And then, with some editorial help, he published a second book of correspondences. And it was during our conversations, in fact, in answer to my question of what sustained him during the most difficult times that he said, "Psalm 46. I read it every single day." "God is our refuge and our strength."

Early in 1941, Helen and the children, along with many American missionary families, returned to the States. Art elected to stay behind to serve the Presbyterian church, school, and hospital in Hwaiyuan. Things were beginning to get difficult for Westerners, Americans, and American

missionaries, particularly, in 1941. A lay teacher in the school was arrested and executed. The school library was confiscated. Then teachers were arrested, forced to drink gallons of water and then kicked and beaten unconscious. America was still neutral, but many Westerners decided it was time to leave. Art stayed. He and Helen exchanged wonderful letters—she telling him about the children and life in Wooster; he telling her, carefully, so as to avoid censorship, about his life and work in China.

And then on December 7, 1941, everything changed. The mountains shook, the sea roared, the earth itself forever changed. A Japanese officer knocked on the door and told him that Japanese forces had destroyed the American Navy, that Art was now an enemy and should report to the hospital for instruction. The year that followed was spent under guard, with little or no access to the outside, with rumors of torture and execution, the constant threat of death.

Art kept a journal and wrote in 1942:

> These months are filled with tension and uncertainty. We never knew what the Japanese were going to do next. . . . The small amount of work we could do helped to relieve the tension, but I found other outlets that kept me sane. . . . I found a new interest in the psalms. (*To Bend and Rise as the Bamboo*, p. 168)

And so whenever I read

> God is our refuge and strength,
> a very present help in trouble.
> Therefore, we will not fear,
> though the earth should change,
> though the mountains shake

I think of my friend, Art Romig.

Walter Brueggemann, preeminent scholar of the psalms, says that some psalms were written for good times, when all is well and the world is sane and safe and orderly. He calls them psalms of orientation. The trouble, of course, is that life is not always like that, even though we wish profoundly that it were. And so, Bruggemann says, there are psalms of disorientation, written for times when things look bleak and people are feeling weak and anxious, times when we experience the world "falling apart," times of radical change when old certainties no longer hold. Psalm 46 is crucial, Professor Brueggemann says, "given our cultural situation of dismay and anxiety." (See *The Spirituality of the Psalms*, pp. 19-25, and *Texts for Preaching, Year A.*)

God, the psalmist asserts, is not only present in the good times, when nature is kind, and the sea calm, and the crops plentiful, and children all healthy, and personal well-being secure, and enemies subdued and quiet. God, the psalmist asserts, is present and may be relied upon when nature is unkind, when mountains shake, and the sea roars—when radical change happens and nothing feels safe and secure. God is in the midst of all that, too.

Last Sunday's *New York Times Magazine* was an eye-catcher. Bright yellow with bold black print, punctuated by two blood red phrases. "Nuclear Terrorist Attack . . . How scared should we be?" it asked. I read it and was almost sorry I did. "Experts on terrorism and nuclear proliferation agree on one thing: not if, but when. . . . Eight countries have nuclear weapons. . . . There are 25,000 nuclear warheads in the world, 15,000 in Russia."

I haven't been so scared since the day the Soviet Union exploded a hydrogen bomb and my fifth grade teacher, Miss Moore, had us practice "Duck and Cover," and we hid under our desks two times in one day, and then she described what was going to happen to Altoona, Pennsylvania—which she said was a top strategic military target—in such gruesome detail that the entire fifth grade class went home crying, convinced that it was all over, expecting to find our homes and parents incinerated.

How scared should we be? Plenty, it seems. The government itself seems to want us to be scared, with recent warnings that another attack is imminent, inevitable, and around the corner. But we can't say when, where, or how. "What are we supposed to do with this information?" Thomas Friedman asked recently in the *New York Times.* "Never go into another apartment building, because reports suggest an Al Quaeda agent may rent an apartment just to blow up the whole structure?" I loved the West Coast columnist's response to that particular warning—namely that San Francisco is safe because apartments are so scarce and so expensive the terrorists couldn't afford the rent. "What are we supposed to do? Not go outside? Don't go near national monuments? Who wants to live this way?" Friedman asked for many of us and then gave what I thought was a Psalm 46 bit of advice: "We need to grow up. If we're going to maintain our open society, all we can do is take all reasonable precautions and then suck it up and learn to live with a higher level of risk. That is our fate, so let's not drive ourselves crazy" *(New York Times, 20 May 2002).*

Psalm 46 was written for people experiencing radical change. Old certainties had dissolved. Accommodation had to be made to new reality, and the psalmist's bold suggestion is that God is stable when all else is not, that God is in the new reality as well as the old. And on a deeply personal basis, that is important news for all of us. For the truth is that before and beyond the global changes affected by September 11, all of us have to deal with change on a more personal level. And not many of us are very good at it. Change is hard. So difficult in fact that a very simple book about change continues to be a runaway best seller. As literature, it barely rises to junior high level. But its content could not be more relevant. *Who Moved My Cheese?* is the title, and it's about two mice and two little people who live in a maze and depend on cheese, love cheese, adore cheese, which makes them feel secure and happy and safe, and then one day they have to deal with a new reality when the cheese is no longer there. Not a very glamorous metaphor, but it works. The mice set off to find new cheese. The little people do a lot of talking about what happened to the cheese, how wonderful it used to be, how their whole lives are structured around cheese being where it is supposed to be. While the mice are out looking for new cheese, the little people are ranting and raving about how unfair it is, and then they start blaming each other for the missing cheese. Finally one says, "Things are changing around here. Maybe we need to change and do things differently." The other objects: "I like it here. It's so

comfortable. It's what I know. Besides it's dangerous out there. I'm not interested in getting lost. . . . I'm too old for that" (p. 41).

Millions of people are reading that little book not because it's great literature, but because there is truth in it: that change, whatever form it takes, is difficult.

Sometimes change comes in the need to learn how to work differently. In the forward to the book, Ken Blanchard says, "While in the past we may have wanted loyal employees, today we need flexible people who are not possessive about how things are done around here." And I was reminded of Martin Marty's famous quip that the last seven words of the church are going to be "But we never did it that way before." Institutions that can't change die. Churches that won't change decline and become irrelevant. Later today, Fourth Presbyterian Church will decide whether or not to think in new ways about the future of our city and our immediate neighborhood. And one can argue that we are who we are today and have the great privilege of thinking boldly about the future because those who came before us were brave enough to think boldly about their future—which is our present.

Sometimes change comes at us in the need to work differently. Sometimes it comes with an unexpected announcement that your job has been abolished—we're downsizing and you're unemployed. Sometimes it is when a long and stable relationship begins to fray and tear and then unexpectedly comes apart. "I don't love you anymore. I'm leaving." And your whole world is turned upside down, and you have to think in ways you stopped thinking years ago and never wanted to think about again. And sometimes it comes when your indestructible body lets you down and you have to deal with the limitations of aging. And sometimes it comes, frighteningly, when the test comes back positive, the lump is malignant, the artery is blocked. And for all of us comes the time when our work is done—your parenting or the vocation that was the organizing principal for your life for forty years is over and you have think in brand new ways about who you are and what you will do and what your life now means.

And it is precisely then—when everything is up for grabs, when the earth is moving beneath your feet, and the mountains are shaking, and the sea is roaring—it is precisely then that you can count on the strong presence of God.

We believe that in Jesus Christ that same God, our refuge and strength, came among us. We believe God was present as he lived and taught and healed and laughed and enjoyed the company of his friends, but that God was present in the dark times, too, as he experienced radical disorientation: betrayal and arrest and suffering and death. And so we Christians remember him right in the middle of all that, breaking bread and drinking wine with his friends.

It is precisely in the midst of radical disorientation that God is steady and sure, our refuge and our strength. It is precisely when everything seems to be falling apart that the psalmist recommends, mandates actually, orders us

> Be still
> and know that I am God!

As he was dying of ALS, Art asked me to preach at his memorial service, which I did. The most precious memory of him is the time he and Helen visited us in Chicago. Helen was donating some rare Chinese art to the Museum of Natural History. I suggested we celebrate with dinner at the Tang Dynasty, a fine Chinese restaurant in the neighborhood. I loved to hear Art speak Chinese, particularly to order Chinese food. So Art was talking to the waitress, in Chinese, and the conversation suddenly became very animated. The waitress and Art were talking more loudly and with great energy. Suddenly she turned and walked quickly into the kitchen. "What's going on?" I asked. "That was about more than food." "Well," he said, "she's from Hwaiyuan, the village where we lived. She's a student at UIC." With that the waitress returned with two other waitresses and the cook. They were all from the village, studying at UIC, working at the Tang Dynasty. What followed was a joyful family reunion, all in Chinese, talking about people Art and Helen knew forty years ago, children they had baptized and taught. On and on it went to the delight and the annoyance of the other customers who were totally ignored and becoming impatient.

Art's greatest worry was that his work had been wasted—that the war and the subsequent Communist regime had totally eliminated the church. So no one was happier than Art when in 1979, the Chinese Christian Church emerged from underground, from secret house churches all over China, more than 5 million strong.

And Psalm 46 will always remind me of him.

At the New Year, 1942, three weeks after Pearl Harbor, when the world became radically disorientated, Art wrote a prayer:

> Lord God, we thank thee for the year just completed, for its joys and also its sorrows. . . . We thank thee for the storms which have given toughness to our spirits. Give us strength to travel the path of hardship, uncertainty, and fatigue. . . . Give us the courage to step forward along the path of faith. Give us, O Lord, thyself and we shall have all.
>
> God is our refuge and strength,
> a very present help in trouble.
> Therefore we will not fear,
> though the earth should change,
> though the mountains shake. . . .
> Be still and know that I am God.

Amen.

We pray for your world, O God, and for peace in it. We are aware of the allure that violence and war holds for some, that replaces the insidious dread of and boredom with the ordinariness of life. Show them the more excellent way of your love that binds up the wounds of others rather than inflicts wounds upon others.

Guide the leaders of this nation, of India and Pakistan, and of Israel and Palestine, to have the nerve to replace weapons of destruction with words of reconciliation, so that lands that are holy to some may be sacred not because of their place but because of their peace.

Lord of the church, as we recoil in horror and outrage at the disillusionment and disarray that has come in the wake of revelations of abuse and pain inflicted upon those unable at the time to defend themselves, and as we pray for both the victims and the accused, help us to be mindful of the fragility of our own goodness and our need for your forgiving grace and for the cleansing of your judgment. Grant that in time and by your Spirit, healing may come to those who have been hurt and with whom, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we identify in their hurt. Bless the bishops of the church as they convene to deal with the needs and issues before them, and help all of us to keep the twin towers of illusion and denial from obscuring our view of the reality of both our humanness at its worst and of your redeeming love at its best.

And when life gangs up on us and we think we don't matter and we are discouraged, thinking all is lost, help us to remember that we are loved with an everlasting love, from which we can never be separated, and which will never let us go.

In the name of and with gratitude for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we pray, and with words he invites us to use, say, Our Father . . .